

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA – Advice from Fulbright Alumni

The following are extracts from Fulbright Grantee Reports and are not meant to reflect the views of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), its cooperating agencies, or the U.S. Embassy.

Topics covered below include:

- Cultural notes
- Personal Interactions and Language
- Phones
- Social Life
- Housing
- Banking
- Street Life
- Crime and Safety
- Transportation
- Clothing
- Food
- Health
- Websites and other helpful resources

Cultural notes

The ethnic distinctions and divisiveness in former Yugoslavia have long been a mystery to me and something that I hoped to understand better during my appointment. Americans have experience with racial prejudice and discrimination, but have difficulty understanding how a civil war and continuing instability have resulted in a population that shares the same language and have the same genetic origin. I still do not understand this, but am more aware now that the past conflict was a result of external interests and power brokers, not a deep hate that Serbs, Muslims, and Croats have for each other. I never talked to anyone who thought the war was necessary or produced anything beneficial. Everyone considers it regrettable. Even people that lost their homes or family members in the war expressed a desire to look to the future and expressed little animosity toward individuals of other ethnicities. They usually regard themselves as victims of external circumstances. I came back to the U.S. with a new appreciation for our system of government and for the opportunities that we take for granted. While we have difficulties of our own, we seem to be making some progress in eliminating inequalities. I do not think we face any issue as perplexing as, for example, how to reunite the Republic of Srpska with the Federation of Muslims and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The existing system (division of land areas but with a three-headed presidency) is dysfunctional. The Dayton accord was intended to end the war, not to be a de facto constitution that it has become.

Personal Interactions and Language

Bosnians are a proud people who must be approached with respect no matter what their rank or station in life. Therefore, all Bosnians must be treated with complete respect, and never (never!) with condescension. It is also important to be patient and persistent. There is always a lot going on under the surface, and therefore making appointments and getting commitments may in some cases become a long drawn out affair. Sometimes there are misunderstandings or miscommunications, and other times people may not show up or do what you believed they agreed to do. There are at least two possible American reactions to this: 1) indignation; 2) frustration. Rather than beginning with "how dare (s)he?" it is best to begin from the beginning by setting up an appointment and/or commitment and having them/it succeed. Persistence is very important. Follow up emails with phone calls, and even personal visits. Some of my university colleagues said it was all right for me to show up any time even without an appointment. If you can get that, it's golden. Then there is a better chance of "catching" your colleague for doing or getting this or that done. No matter how frustrating some Bosnian colleagues may become insofar as time management is concerned, never give in to frustration or you will never get

anything accomplished. The question must be asked and answered: Would you rather be right or effective, if you cannot be both.

Always greet everyone you encounter. Ignoring people in Bosnia is considered bad manners. So whether meeting a university rektor, or getting into a taxi, or sitting down in a restaurant and a waiter approaches, it's: Dobro jutro, etc. Personally, my wife and I know perhaps 25-30 words in Bosnian between us. But living in Sarajevo was made very pleasant by responses from all Bosnians whether they spoke English or not. Indeed, learn a few Bosnian phrases before you get there:

http://wikitravel.org/en/Bosnian_phrasebook When appropriate, there is always one phrase that brings a smile to every Bosnian's face. Nema problema which simply, literally means "no problem." It conveys a sense of everything is all right -- literally, no problem. You need not speak Bosnian to get along well in Bosnia. But you must be polite and make at least a minimal effort by learning common greetings. It conveys the message that you are trying, you are not better than them, and you respect them. Following this common sense approach you will be amazed at how many doors are opened for you (and your Fulbright project!).

Phones

The U.S. Embassy has provided Fulbrighters with cell phones for them to use. If this practice continues, you won't need to acquire a cell phone.

Social Life

When invited to someone's home for dinner ALWAYS bring flowers. You can add to this some good quality FRESH pastries if you discover a good store for baked goods ... a good Pekara. Bosnians love presents, so try to bring along some good quality, inexpensive gifts or souvenirs where you come from to give out to colleagues, their secretaries (may help assure your next appointment!), the colleague's wife and kids. When you finally complete your project and plans to leave, make sure you have left time to say goodbye to everyone. It is important to have a farewell dinner with your colleague and farewell coffees with more casual associates ... especially if you expect to return some day.

Once in country, I tried to adopt the mentality of never turning down an invitation. It provided me with lots of cultural experiences with local people but also opportunities to meet many other foreigners here as well.

Housing

You will want to come to Sarajevo and stay in a hostel or hotel for the first few nights while you find housing. Realtors (most of whom speak excellent English) will show you apartments, and you can usually sign a lease and move in the next day. You can look for properties at various sites including <http://www.realestatesarajevo.com/> and <http://www.imobilia.ba/>.

There are no neighborhoods in Sarajevo that are particularly unsafe, but you will probably want to live near Old Town, because most law offices are there (so your defence team that you are assigned to is likely to be located there) and that is where everything interesting is happening: clubs, bars, restaurants, theaters, etc. Make sure to get an apartment or house with internet capability.

Banking

The best way to get money is from ATMs. Make sure you know what your home institution charges for use of foreign ATMs. Charles Schwab accounts not only charge no fees for the use of foreign ATMs, but reimburse whatever you might be charged by the foreign institution charges you for using their ATM. UniCredit bank's ATMs charges fees. Raffeissen Bank, and Volksbank do not. Volksbank's ATMs give money in smaller denominations which is really helpful in local markets, as they cannot always make change.

I opened a bank account while in Tuzla, but in hindsight I would simply use an ATM card to access funds (in konvertible marks) from a bank in the U.S. The ATM fees are less than the commission for currency exchange.

Banking is as modern as in the United States. Therefore, the best place to get money is from ATM machines inside or on the side of banks. In high tourist areas such as Old Town (Stari grad) in Sarajevo, there is an ATM machine in each block, or at least so it seems. Exchanging currencies you will always pay a higher service fee than your home bank charges for getting out cash from an ATM in Bosnia. Bring along a spare ATM card.

The ATMs in country are generally reliable (I have never encountered a problem). I did notify my Credit Union that I would be living abroad and traveling for the year and provided them a list of (potential) countries in which I would likely expect to use my check card. I also provided them a local phone number (I was already in possession of a BiH sim card) and I activated online banking so that I could monitor my account from abroad.

Street Life

The old town (Stari Grad) offers the most options for shopping, restaurants and bars. There is a great pedestrian culture in Stari Grad, with the main shopping street, Ferhadija, closed to all vehicular traffic. All trams run East along the river (the southern edge of Stari Grad) then make a 180 degree turn around the National Library ruins (on the East end of town) to run West along the northern edge of Stari Grad. These run every 5 minutes or so. Many stores close on Sundays or have very limited hours. A couple of very new, Western style, shopping malls are now open. BBI Centar in Old Town in particular, is a hub of activity. There's a food court on the 4th floor that has free wifi. Next to BBI Centar is Cinema City, a new and very nice movie multiplex that shows first-run movies remarkably inexpensively (less than half what you'd pay to see the same film in the US). Usually only children's movies are dubbed in Bosanski; you'll be able to see American and British films in English with Bosanski subtitles.

Crime and Safety

For the first time in my life anywhere, I had my wallet stolen at the very site at the in Sarajevo where the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated June 1914 next to the Latin Bridge over the Miljacka River in Sarajevo's Old Town district. A pickpocket posing as a beggar lifted my wallet (ATM card and all). She was a virtuoso. I write this as someone who had grown up many decades ago on the streets of New York City where right after we are weaned from the bottle, first thing we're taught is to protect and not anyone near our wallets! Bring duplicates of your ATM and credit cards and keep them in a very safe place (with your passport) so that in the unlikely event you get pick pocketed, you'll have back up access to money.

Transportation

The taxis are safe and reliable. Most taxis will have a meter and will turn it on to calculate an appropriate fare, but not from the airport. They all charge a premium for arrivals from the airport, and even though the fare TO the airport will meter to about 12-15 km (konvertible marks), or about \$8-11, the fare from the airport to downtown will probably run twice that. This is routine. Just smile and pay it. They WILL take Euro at many establishments in Sarajevo, including these taxis. The rule of thumb is that 1 Euro equals 2 km, so your taxi trip from the airport is probably going to cost you about 12-15 Euro. Most taxi drivers do not speak English. Be prepared to show them a slip of paper with your destination written out on it. Taxi drivers do not normally expect tips. Token tips are nice to do (rounding up), however, to spare the driver making very small change. Taxis are plentiful and cheap, and the drivers generally do not try to take advantage of you. But just to be safe, look for a meter, and if it is not turned on, point at it and say "meter" and they'll turn it on, so you get charged a fair fare. Typical fares are 4-10 km [\$3-7] a trip.

Buses and trams cost 1.60 - 2 km (\$1.15 -1.40). You will see locals carrying monthly passes, but those are available only through school and employment offices. It is unlikely you will be able to get one. You can buy bus and tram tickets (karte) from the driver as you board (although don't expect the driver to make change for a large bill), or you can buy tickets at little news and cigarette kiosks (called "trafika") all over town. When you board the tram or bus, be sure to punch your ticket. Bosnian transportation personnel periodically board the trams and buses to check passes and tickets. Persons found who have not paid for their ride will be forced to exit and will be fined on the spot.

Bicycles are unusual and not recommended for safety reasons. There are no bike lanes and cars are not used to watching for bikes.

Even though I'm a very competent driver, I found it wiser to rely on taxis (which are very inexpensive in Bosnia) and public transport than renting a car. Half the time there's nowhere to park. The other half the time too many Bosnian drivers are fast and loose.

The only public transportation to Tuzla is by bus. I initially arrived by bus from Zagreb (5+ hours, six times a day) and later traveled to/from Sarajevo (almost hourly departures), Belgrade, and Banja Luka. There is train service to Doboj with connecting service to Banja Luka, Sarajevo and elsewhere, but it very slow with many stops. I took it on my trip to Banja Luka, but returned by bus.

Clothing

Before I left I purchased clothes that would be more suitable for working in an Islamic institution. For a woman this generally means having arms, legs, and chest/neck fully and somewhat loosely covered. Even though it is not an Islamic country in general even non-Muslim people in Sarajevo are often more, even if tightly, clothed because of the sun or cold.

Food

Groceries: Although restaurants are relatively inexpensive, you will probably want to prepare your own meals too. Corner grocery stores can be found every couple of blocks throughout the city. There are a few large, bright, Western-style supermarkets too that have opened up in the past few years, but while they offer a larger selection of food, their prices are no better (and often worse) than those at the small

corner groceries. And they are generally hard to get to or from if you don't have a car. You'll probably want to find a nearby bakery (pekara, PECKuhruh) to buy fresh bread from. Cheap and delicious. They sell many other types of rolls, breadsticks, pretzels, and filled breads (filled either with meats or sweets). Meat can be purchased at a butcher shop (mesnica).

There are also several large produce markets (including Markale on the northern edge of Stari Grad, Grbavica on the south side of the river and farther West), throughout the city that are excellent places to get fresh fruit and vegetables. The quality of the produce is outstanding and the prices are very good. If you like fish, they have wonderfully fresh fish in the fish markets around Markale market. They'll clean the fish for you. Chocolate. Milka chocolate is available everywhere and is addictive. After eating Milka for several months, you will never be able to choke down another Hershey bar. Milk. It is rare to find fresh milk for sale in Sarajevo. You can buy boxed milk that does not need to be refrigerated until it is opened. It's not bad. You get used to it.

You have to pay for groceries with cash, so do not attempt to use a credit card. You may have to bag your own groceries.

Restaurants: Most restaurants are inexpensive by American standards. However, it may be difficult to find a lot of vegetarian options. Most local restaurants, especially the cheap ones, specialize in grilled meat. Cevapi are small grilled sausages served with diced raw onion and "somun" (a nice spongy pita bread). This is a local favorite, and popular with visitors as well. Usually a Cevapi meal runs about 6 km (\$4). Burek is another popular "fast food," a type of meat pie, rolled into tubes of thin filo pastry, and served by the gram. You can order 300 grams of it, and they'll weigh out that much and serve it to you on a plate (or wrap it to go). It is even cheaper than Cevapi, costing usually 10 km (\$7) a kilo (enough to feed three people pretty well). The Burek shops all offer vegetarian versions of burek: sirnica (with cheese), zeljanica (with spinach), and krompiruaja (with potatoes).

Popular here is "Turkish coffee" which is very strong. It is part of the traditional "Bosnian breakfast" : coffee and cigarette. Bosnians love to eat outdoors and be outdoors. The cafes are very much oriented that way, and the apartments almost always have balconies where you can have your morning coffee and cigarette in the fresh air. Bosnians who visit the U.S. have expressed dismay that Americans all have beautiful patio furniture and they never use any of it.

It is rare to find a restaurant with a non-smoking section. Indoor spaces will often be choked with smoke. You're in the Balkans. Get used to it.

Coca-Cola and Fanta are ubiquitous, but far more interesting are local beverages. With cevapi or burek, try ordering a glass of plain, drinkable yogurt. It is what locals usually drink with spiced, grilled meats, and it is a great combination. It will cost you half what a Coke would cost. Also, try Schweppe's Bitter Lemon, a delightfully tart soda sold all over Europe, but unavailable in the US. Although Sarajevo is majority Muslim, beer (pivo) is easy to find. The local Sarajevsko Pivo is brewed right across the river from Old Town. The local favorite is a potent local liquor called "rakija" (RAH kee ya).

Health

Medicines. Unlike the United States, there are a variety of prescription medicines that if you have the empty medicine vial with a proper label on it identifying the medicine a pharmacist may fill it for you. [American pharmacies may not ship medicines outside of the United States] In my case, I ran out of

Liptor (cholesterol statin). At a pharmacy in Old Town, Sarajevo where no one knew me, the pharmacist simply sold me a one month supply at half the price it costs in the 'States WITH insurance. However, if you have some very special medication make sure you bring lots of it with you.

Doctors and dentists are plentiful and fairly modern. The U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo has lists of those who are recommended.

Particular parts of the country have high levels of air pollution during the winter due to the burning of coal for heat. Tuzla is one of these places. Although I would not consider the air quality of Banja Luka excellent, it is not something that hinders me on a daily basis, despite having asthma.

Websites and other helpful resources

One video is highly recommended: The Death of Yugoslavia. It is riveting and over the course of its six 50-minute chapters, provides much interesting historical backdrop. If you cannot find it in a local library, you can watch it online at <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/death-of-yugoslavia/>. YouTube also has it, but broken down into many small pieces.

Google translate will be enormously helpful: use "Croatian" as the language you are translating to and from. If you use the Google Chrome web-browser, it will translate Bosnian web pages automatically for you. Croatian is slightly different from Bosnian, but the differences are pretty minor, and Bosnians all understand Croatian when they hear it. Buy and carry a small Croatian/English Dictionary at all times (the little yellow Langenschiedt one is good). It will help you out of jams, when you're not being understood. You can also buy these in Sarajevo for about 10 km.

Sarajevo navigator lists all the events in the city

Interactive map (Google maps is useless in Sarajevo, although you can see unlabeled streets on Satellite View): <http://www.navigator.ba/maps/sarajevo/dispmap.php>

General information, including events (movies, plays, opera, etc.):
<http://www.sonar.ba/events.php?lang=en>

Bus schedules in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro: <http://www.autobusni-kolodvor.com/en/>

Timetable for European trains: <http://www.eurail.com/planning/timetables>

Bosnian phrasebook http://wikitravel.org/en/Bosnian_phrasebook

Virtual Tour of Old Town Sarajevo <http://www.vthawaii.com/EXTRA/Sarajevo/Bascarsija.html>